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BARRETT, LYNNE MARIE. Solitary. (1974) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 54.

The four stories included in this thesis approach the same problem from different angles, use different techniques, and reach different conclusions. The solitude of the individual is the problem. Humanity has invented solutions as varied as social ritual, hard work, and the arts. People reach a world of answers, from refusing the question to exalting it.

In the first story, "Hawaya," the character's isolation is physical and self-conscious, and her story is the most conventional of the four. "Hawaya" appeared in the Spring, 1974 issue of The Greensboro Review.

"The Girl and The Cockroach" dabbles in fantasy, and I hope in comedy, one of the best solutions of all.

In the last two stories, the individuals search within themselves, one reluctantly, one eagerly, for answers. Liberties have been taken with punctuation and tense to show that all the scenes exist within the mind of the character. Kate, in "The Palisades Glisten," finds she has chosen a preoccupation to keep from facing herself. In "To Carve Out Dials Quaintly, Point By Point" Macy wanders through the interior landscape of guilt, resentment, and coincidence, rejecting easy answers to the unanswerable "why?" of death.

SOLITARY

"

This thesis has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of
North Carolina at Greensboro.

by

Lynne Marie Barrett

Thesis Advisor

Ed. Chappell

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APPROVAL PAGE

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HAWAII

The smell of bananas, not an over-ripe grocery smell but a tender fragrance, floated to her over the balcony. They grew, those bananas, on the tree outside, just level with her room, and they tasted like strawberries. That absurd flavor was one of the few genuine pleasures she had found on this trip. Most of the sights and the people had all the garishness of postcards.

"Hotel Princess Koa" was etched between palm trees on the pile of hotel stationery on the desk. Kay was trying to write her parents the happy-trip-so-glad-you-sent-me letter that would permit them to forget about her in comfort. It was no worse than writing advertising copy for all those products to which she was quite indifferent--or no, it was a bit more unpleasant, for now she was the consumer in "Tropadise," now she was the victim.

Over the balcony came the sounds of new arrivals in the hotel limousine. Just in from the airport and breathing romance. Ah, those flights from the mainland, two hours of sunset as the jet battled against the rotating earth. And then twilight over Honolulu, the passengers full of the adventure of being up till their midnight and losing no time, their eyes bright with the crescent of light around the bay and the spokes of illumination marked out up the hills to the backbone, the

Pali. In deference to this tourist thrill residents kept a light on in an ocean-side window each night, tokens for the spectacle. Kay switched off the desk lamp and went to stand in the semi-darkness of the balcony to watch the new arrivals. Not like the other young people on her trip, at least, all avidly groping for one another and a tropic romance. These two were middle-aged, or more.

"Stand over there, Barb, in front of that tree. Can you just hold on a minute with the bags, son? I gotta get this shot," came his east coast voice.

"This okay, honey?"

"Sure. The kids'll love it. Now take those flowers you got at the airport and put'em over your coat. I got it."

The woman, dimly visible against the trees, came into the illuminated courtyard of the hotel. Short and plump, with a wilting hairset and a heavy coat, she looked out of place among the monster gladiolas and the stuccoed pastel. She spoke to her husband, now hidden from Kay beneath the balcony, "You must've used up a whole roll of film."

"Well, we only make this trip once, don't we?"

"I guess so. Gee, Gus, it is beautiful though, isn't it?" They moved, exclaiming, into the hotel.

How could they all be so the same, Kay marvelled. Every time, seeing the flowers, and the sea, and the hot bright colors, thousands of mediocrities all salivating like conditioned dogs, snapped cameras at sunsets and plumeria

leis. How could anyone have a genuine reaction to all this prearranged cinematic beauty?

She pictured Gus and Barb checking in below. On their once in a lifetime trip; she imagined Barb filling out the coupon on the back of a cornflakes box for a "Jumbo Trade Super Sweepstakes." And the day they won, Barb calling Gus at work, a great occasion. They bought a new camera for the trip, and arduously debated slides over prints, and read the article on Hawaii in the World Book. Kay filled in the sketch with venom, and somehow heard a reprimand in her mother's voice. Sometimes, Kay, I think you just hate people. You certainly aren't social. Not people, Mother, you just can't call them people, she argued back across the continent. And I wouldn't ask them to like me. Not that they could anyway, the empty and enthusiastic ones around her. She might be a failure of a person, but Kay was no sucker for sunsets.

The Hotel Princess Koa was a little city of its own. On prime ocean-front property, it had, besides the beach, a fresh water swimming pool, gardens, shops for clothing and souvenirs disguised as native huts, three restaurants catering to occidental ideas of the oriental, a nightclub, and a wandering band. Once a week the management put on a large-scale luau for the benefit of the guests, and this night

marked the first such luau of Kay's tour group's three week stay. Leaving her letter writing for a time, she rejected the thought of wearing her first muumuu, and descended to the hotel gardens in a skirt and halter.

The tour group was arranged by a travel agent to reduce the rates by booking for forty, and to see that a group of young people all had each other before they ever hit the islands. The main attraction was rapid romance. While Kay wouldn't have called the group young--more than half of them were past her twenty-four--she did consider that acting out their ideas of youth before it became too ridiculous was their prime obsession. Even on the plane she had noticed the furtive assessment of possible mates, the first tentative moves, not to waste a minute. Kay herself had read a book most firmly. Now, within a week, she assumed that most of the pairing up was done, and she even gathered that a second round of switching had begun.

Looking around at the hotel crowd in the torch-lit gardens, she saw amid the families and businessmen several mats occupied by the members of her group. She seated herself, cross-legged, at the end of one of these mats. The pasty-faced travellers she remembered had turned into sunburnt, wildly clothed roisterers. She assumed everyone was several drinks up on her.

One girl across from her, who Kay instinctively classified as a secretary, was wearing a combination of green

and turquoise eye shadows that would have been ludicrous the week before; now, however, the color was muted by the bronzing of her face, and the violent coloring of her long formal holoku. Kay, staring at her, noticed that her shoulders were peeling. The girl, catching Kay's eye, smiled, and Kay looked away.

Young men of Oriental or Filipino or mixed descents, for Kay knew that the true Polynesians were just about eliminated, carried in more torches and placed them artfully about in their prearranged places. Very tan, loinclothed, the young men exited and returned with trays of food. No pig, that was going too far, but ham and rice and guava and passionfruit, chicken and poi and everything with pineapple. As they carried the food in they chanted, making it a pageant. "Very effective," Kay told herself. "Carefully planned. Well done."

The poi-eating was an occasion for much comment. The women made faces, and some refused, waiting to be wooed into trying the paste. Kay tasted it silently, and found it bland, uninteresting, but no worse than yogurt. The young man next to her, a sandy-haired type with wire-rimmed glasses and a shirt covered with orange and turquoise suns, was eating with gusto, having mastered the two-finger method. He caught her looking at him and smiled. "Like it?"

"Not bad," she replied, and concentrated on her meat. What kind of inane comment was that? She sounded as dumb as--

"Are you enjoying the trip?" he persisted.

"I--it's not bad." This time she emphasized with her shoulder between them to cut him off. He looked away. Again. Couldn't she think of anything else? Why hadn't she just said "it reeks" and let him know exactly where she stood? She did, she sounded as dumb as the little secretary across from her, who had just let herself be coaxed by her two neighbors to try the stuff. The man on her right, who had red hair and the beginnings of a blond beard, was feeding it to her by hand.

"Just like glue," she squealed, and turned the full force of her green eyelids on him. Kay was embarrassed to be there.

Some of the young men were refilling the fruity rum drinks, and Kay studied the impassive face of one near her. He must hear that glue remark every week, she thought. He must despise us. Not bad, how stupid, yes, they must despise all of us.

At one end of the clearing in the gardens a spotlight flared, and to ukeleles and drums a young man sang and two girls danced a slow hula. That's worth it, Kay thought, to be able to move that way, but who in this crowd can appreciate it. They're just horny for romance.

Suddenly, the spotlight went out, the drums beat fast, and down from the giant palms at each corner of the eating area slid a young native, a pseudo-native, with a torch in his hand. Moving rapidly to the front they danced a Tahitian hula,

fast and breathless in the flickering light. The crowd was silent, caught up in the effect. The two girls in grass skirts joined them, and their hips moved with the rapidity of the drums, even faster, as if their bones themselves were flexible. There was speed and drama and great beauty. Kay caught herself, and glanced at all the tourists about her, all aroused at the sight of the abandon they sought when they left their solid continental homes. The girls danced down the long aisle between the mats, and reached Kay's end of the garden.

The red-haired man jumped up and began, drunkenly, to grab at the dancer near him. "Go Don," shouted one of his friends at the meal, and the group of young people took up the chant, "Don, godon, godon, goDon" repeated until the syllables changed their meaning, seemed part of another language. Don danced, mimicking the hip movements of the girl, at first awkwardly, his ass protruding. Then, caught in the chant, he bent his knees, relaxed his hips, and for moments he had it, the dance catching him, the drums moving him. Then, drunk and unfamiliar, he lost the beat for a second and became ridiculous again, stumbled and fell back to his seat to the applause and laughter of the crowd. He looked lost, or stunned. "Hey, that was great," he said slowly. "That was really great." He picked up his coconut shell and took a long drink. "You should try that sometime," he said to the eye-shadowed girl.

"I could never move like that," she said, but to Kay she looked eager.

"Sure you could. I'll show you," he drank again and leaned closer. Kay thought she heard him whisper, "Later," then thought she'd imagined it, and was disgusted with herself and him, both at once. Then, glancing sideways, she thought that the man with the glasses was about to speak to her, and she knew her reply would be a stupid, "not bad" one. He'd only speak anyway because I happen to be beside him, she thought. Propinquity is all it takes on this expedition. He didn't seem bad, but why would anyone be on this trip if they weren't opportunistic or stupid. His parents couldn't have sent him to get him out of the way; he wasn't someone's over-age problem sent off for a cure. He was, he was turning to say something. And Kay got up, stiff from sitting on her legs for so long, and with numb steps left, trying to be unobtrusive among the warmly convivial hotel guests.

She returned to her room on the second floor, thought of again trying the letter to her parents, and headed for the shower.

The bathrooms of the Hotel Princess Koa were miniature lagoons, with hanging plants, bathrooms all green-blue tile and green-blue towels, and even green glass panels around the shower. Washing her heavy hair in water and steam, Kay felt submerged. A moonlight swim, she commented, parrots in the jungle shrilling and fish grazing by. Ah, Blue Hawaii, right

off the screen in Cinemascope and Technicolor. She could feel her face losing its shape as she started to cry. A detached part of her watched and almost laughed at the girl, dripping wet and soapy, crying at nothing. Nothing specific, the other part defended, just everything, just me. Cut it out, the two merged and she slammed down on the left tap handle, leaving only cold water to shock her. She scrubbed at her scalp and concentrated on being better, not relapsing into tears.

Before she went to bed, Kay stood for a few minutes on her little balcony and listened to the drums and the tourists, apparently learning a new song, chatting in the night. Or maybe that Don was dancing again. From the sounds, blurred as they travelled to her through the damp oceanic atmosphere, she could almost picture natives, if it weren't for the lights of towering hotels along the strip of Waikiki.

Kay had worked up gradually to a tan, because her fair skin burned even on Jersey's beaches. She never got much darker than her present yellow bronze anyway, but now she had the protection to lie hours in the sun and dream away some of her sentence on the beach. Her tour agenda called for a cross island bus trip (optional) for the day, and she hoped that most of the bikini bunch would take the option so she wouldn't have to see them on the beach. But then, they'd probably feel terrible on the bus; that Don for one must have a wicked hangover.

Kay, in her bathing suit, with her towel trailing behind her, had threaded her way across the width of the hotel, past the thatched huts of the gift shops, and out onto the beach side. Waikiki was as crowded as ever, but on the sands Kay saw only a few members of her tour. The families were out in force, and the honeymooners. And, of course, the surfers. And right in front of Kay a short pale distracted woman in a red muumuu and a wide-brimmed hat woven of palm fronds. As Kay paused a moment before choosing her spot, this woman hurried up to her.

"Excuse me, Miss, but you look like you been here a while, and I wonder if you know anything about renting surfboards? You see--"

"Not really," Kay began, out of habit rejecting the request, although she wondered why the woman, who looked to be about sixty, should want a board.

"Oh, please, Miss, it's just that my husband Gus, he'll be here in a minute, he wants to go surfing, and I wondered if the hotel has somebody who can show him how to do it. He's just dead set on trying this thing." Kay saw that the pale face beneath the sunhat was somehow distressed, and she relented.

"Well, yes, they rent boards and they have instructors. Right inside that little grass hut, through there, see the red striped one in front." Kay listened to a moment of thanks, then headed for the beach.

She enjoyed the sun, but the shallow beach left her with all the irritations of children kicking by and tourist conversations echoing. Kay had almost come to hate the iridescent indigo of the water, she'd overheard so many comments on it. Still, she managed to relax and lay half drowsing in the sun.

"Miss?" came a whisper.

Kay opened her eyes and looked into the pale pink face under palm fronds. "Oh, did your husband find a board?"

"Yes, Miss, I wanted to thank you. I guess I should have found a hotel person, but everyone dresses so casual here, it's hard to tell. And I was worried..." her voice trailed off, uncertain.

"Is your husband surfing now?" For some reason Kay wanted to look at this woman more, something she'd said before. Her husband...her husband Gus...this must be Barb. She looked closer to see if her observations held true today.

"Yes, he's out there with an instructor, a really nice boy. I told him to make sure Gus didn't do anything rash. You can see him from here." Kay sighted along the woman's arm, and saw the short, plump figure of Gus clinging to the front of the board, while behind and above him a slender dark man knelt and paddled. They were headed out.

"I just hope it's not too dangerous. Well, thank you anyway, you know it's hard when you don't know a soul and it's the first day and all." Barb, for Kay was sure

this was Barb, stooped to pick up the shall-decorated bag she had set down in the sand.

"Why not sit here and watch. There's room," Kay said, and marvelled at her friendly tone. She told herself to observe from a distance, from a position of scorn, but she felt curious to see how well these two fitted the story she had invented for them.

"Why thank you. That's very sweet. People must be more friendly out here. Are you a native--do you live here I mean, I know you're not a real--" Barb's voice, which was thin and seemed older than her face, scurried on, afraid of offending.

"No, I've only been here a week. I'm from Jersey."

"Then we're neighbors. Gus and I are from Pennsylvania originally, but we live in Trenton. You?"

"Short Hills. At least my parents do, but I've been with them on and off for the past year."

They sat silent, Barb watching her husband, Kay watching her.

"Oh, he is crazy," Barb shrilled, but she seemed more pleased than alarmed. "A man his age." Kay looked in time to see Gus standing up, wavering, his arms making windmills, and falling most comically into the bay. The beachboy instructor held the board steady and turned it back to pick him up. Barb had caught her breath, then exhaled in a low sigh as Gus struggled back onto the board.

"He really seems to enjoy himself," said Kay. God I say the most inane things all the time, she thought. That's as bad as not bad. But Barb didn't seem to notice.

"Oh yes, he's getting a real kick out of this trip. It was a present you know."

"Oh?"

"Well, of course you wouldn't, but it was a present from our son and his wife for our fortieth wedding anniversary. That was last week. They thought we should get away. They were in Buffalo and we never saw them, but a year and a half ago he was transferred to Trenton where Father works. And they gave us two weeks in Hawaya for our anniversary."

"That's nice," said Kay, sleepy in the sun.

"Pretty rough out there," said a new voice, but one she had heard before. "Didja see, Barb, I stood up."

"You nearly scared the life out of me," his wife replied mildly. "Gus, this is the young lady who told me where the surfboard place was. This is my husband Gus Holman, Miss--"

"Kay Norris."

"Pleased to meet you. Didja ever try one of those things?"

"Yes, once or twice," Kay said, conscious of her earlier lie.

"If I were younger I'd try more of it, but it's just wore me out. Hey, Mother, you got a little color there. You'd better watch it." Barb's arms and legs were flushed with the

sun, and she stood up quickly, revealing blue-veined pallor where her muumuu had been draped over one leg.

"Can't overdo. I burn terrible. Come on, let's go and get the sand off ourselves. We're going to see the Iolani palace this afternoon," she addressed Kay, pronouncing the exotic word slowly and with pride. "After that, why don't you stop by for a drink. Gus and I like our cocktail every afternoon. Please do, around four, room three-twenty-one. Very nice to have met you."

"Nice meeting you," Kay and Gus replied at once, and they left, he wet and sandy, with the hair on his legs and chest gone gray, she rosy in her muumuu. Kay lay back down on her towel. "Such a nice girl," came floating back to her. She smiled into the warm white terry. How nice indeed to be so full of an energetic liking for people. To be so settled and secure. She moved her eyelashes and felt with them the rough loops of thread that made the towel. She stared at the blue shadow each loop made. If maybe she were old, not concerned with being different from everyone else. Now, people must naturally want her out of the way. She sat up and looked around the beach, blinking to focus in the brightness.

She was looking at a towel near her, looking beyond it really at two little boys playing in the sand. But when the man on the towel sat up, he was in the way, and she was looking at him. His hair was fine and light, sandy-colored, and it must be thinning, for when he sat up it stuck straight

out, having no weight at all. He looked at her and his eyes seemed very blue and odd and unfocussed. Then she saw his hands move and he put on the wire-rimmed glasses, hooking them carefully behind each ear. His eyes faded to gray and she saw that it was the man who had been next to her at the luau. She hadn't realized then that he was so tall. He was looking her way still, seeing her now. She smiled and nodded. Just like a secretary with eyeshadow, her inner voice taunted, and she looked away just as he was smiling back. Nobody can be friendly to people like these, she thought, so why can't you just act naturally and leave them alone. She studied his funny thin hair and the way it stayed mussed, and then saw his neck start to turn her way again. Kay quickly gathered up her towel and headed for the hotel, almost running across the beach. There are lots of men you can smile at, she told herself, but not on this trip. These thrill-seekers are not worth it, and I will not let them think they are.

"Rum seems to be the drink for these parts, so I made up some daiquiris," Gus was saying as he ushered her onto the balcony.

"This is the lanai," said Barb, who waited for them, still-wearing her palm hat, but dressed now in shell pink shorts and top that suited her soft chubby body. "I bought a book of phrases in Hawayan today at one of those shacks downstairs. Lanai is porch, but this is as much of one as we've got." The

balcony was identical to Kay's, with white painted straw furniture.

"Here we are." Gus bustled out with three drinks and a glass of ice. Kay took hers and watched Barb pour half of her drink over the ice, setting the rest aside.

Barb explained, "Doctors orders, only one drink a day. But for all these years we've been having two, and I feel cheated. So I split it like this and my heart never knows the difference."

There was a pause while they sipped the tart rum and fruit, but Kay was comfortable and made no move to break the silence.

"Have you seen the Iolani Palace?" Gus asked.

"Yes, earlier in the week I took a tour of the city."

"Very impressive, we thought. Mother here especially liked all those feather robes--must have taken forever to make."

"Some of their clothes are very practical though. Those muumuus are comfortable housedresses."

"Not as cute as shorts." And both Gus and Barb laughed. Kay watched.

"You see," Barb said, laughing, "we went shopping after the Palace."

"And we split up--"

"I was coming to that, Gus. On Kalakaua Avenue we decided to split up because I wanted to see the clothes and Gus was supposed to find a present for Tom, that's our son."

But it was hot, walking along like that, and I was wearing that muumuu that I bought downstairs this morning. So I was in one of the shops and I picked out this outfit here," and Barb indicated her present costume.

"And I was walking along trying to figure what the heck Tom wanted," Gus picked up the story, "and I passed this lady, out of the corner of my eye I saw her and said to myself I said, 'She's pretty cute.' And I kept on walking a few steps and she came back to me just as mad as anything that I hadn't spoken to her and it was Barb here. Just imagine, Mother, after all these years I didn't recognize you."

"I'm just glad you didn't stop me and try to make a pick-up." Barb laughed pleasantly, while Gus just watched, smiling. And Kay felt her own smile, too. She was charmed with the Holmans, and after she and Gus had finished two drinks, and Barb her two halves, she made arrangements to do some "touristing" with Barb the next day and left, feeling soothed and envious.

After dinner Kay returned to her room and picked up the letter she had been writing the evening before. She found she could at last write something satisfactory to her parents.

"Mom and Dad," she began.

"I am feeling very healthy and tan, and getting lots of rest. The weather is beautiful, always the same--a short shower each day, rainbows and sun. I don't see much of the

people on the tour,"--she paused, started to cross out the last phrase, then left it--"but I have met other people at the hotel. I will be home in two weeks."--They wouldn't like that either. The last year at home between her assorted job efforts after she'd quit the agency had just about driven her parents mad. She was no asset to their frantic life. But Kay checked that line of thought and crossed out the last sentence.

"There was a hotel luau last night, and the food was great, even poi."--Not bad, anyway.--"Tomorrow I am going with a friend to see a reconstructed native village and native crafts. Please don't worry about me, as I am fine and would like to stay forever."--She hesitated, then signed--

"Love, Kay"

She copied the whole thing over and sent it off to Short Hills where now it was near midnight and her dashing mother of forty-two years and one minor face lift was probably entertaining, or was being entertained in New York. And Dad was with her, and had had his just one drink to perk him up, and they were undoubtedly avoiding thinking about her as she faced another tropic night.

"Kay, let's--sit down here and catch our breath," gasped Barb near the exit of Lalani Village. "I just don't think I can keep going."

They sat on a log facing a native crafts display, and Kay looking at the older woman saw that all the color was gone from her face, making her sunburn stand out in patches.

"Are you all right? Just wait, I'll get you a drink." Kay ran over to an immense woman who sat pounding taro. She hesitated a moment before asking, so intent and primitive did the woman look, but she glanced back at Barb, who now sat on the ground leaning against the log, and then asked where she could buy a drink for someone in distress.

"No need to buy it. Go to the display of outrigger carving that way and ask for Keoni, John, that is my son, and he will get you some coconut milk, very thin it tastes like lemonade. And some okolehao, too, if it is real distress."

The outriggers were some thirty yards off. Kay, with one look back, ran to the heavy young man in a brown loincloth who was working there. "Are you Keoni?"

"Yes, wahini." Unlike his mother he had a heavy native accent.

"Well, there's an elderly lady with me and we've been walking all morning and now she looks just terrible, sunstroke or something. Your mother said you'd give me some milk or some oko-something?"

"Sure. Okolehao. It's native moonshine, from coconuts." The accent was gone. He went into one of the reconstructed shacks and returned with a husked coconut, a straw coming out of its inner shell. "You give your lady-friend this, then get

her in out of the sun." Kay was on the run back to Barb before he had finished.

The older woman was fanning herself with her hat, and she looked a little better. Kay fed her the coconut milk, and helped Barb up and out to the tourist jeep with pink striped canopy they had rented at the hotel. She fought the gears and the traffic on Kalia Road until Barb felt well enough to talk.

"Really, Kay, thank you so much. I don't know what I would have done. I should have known better than to try and keep up with you all day, but it made me feel so young to be out and bustling about and all. It was just so hot. But this drink really perked me up."

"Don't drink too much of it," said Kay, remembering, "there's alcohol in it, I think. He said something about moonshine."

"He who? Oh, here we are, back at the old ranch," as they pulled in. "It's too late now, anyhow, I drank it all. But it wasn't very much and I feel fine now dear, really." Kay parked and they walked on into the lobby and took the elevator to the Holman's room, while Barb kept chattering.

"...and I wouldn't have missed seeing those orchids in the Botanical for the world. Do feel good, right now. I always did believe in liquor for medicinal--what does old Doctor Connors know anyhow. His wife used to feed her babies grape juice all the time and all of them ended up having terrible teeth. My little Tommy's teeth were just beautiful." With

the heat and the drink, Kay realized, Barb was quite drunk. They sat on the balcony and Kay watched the distant surfers while she let the old woman reminisce.

"...and I know that Sheila, that's my Tommy's wife, Sheila doesn't like it, doesn't like us. She was just as mad as could be when he was being transferred, even though Trenton is the company headquarters and it was a big promotion. Gus swore up and down he didn't do anything to get that promotion, but Sheila, she wouldn't believe it. Tommy, he's a good kid, he didn't mind, but Sheila didn't want to leave Buffalo, and she's been nagging him about us ever since. I know it. Tommy doesn't say a word, acourse, but he's got the look of a man with a nagging wife. So she sent us away. She just had the baby a month ago, and she doesn't want us around to see him so she sent us away. What do we want with Hawaya, we're too old for this stuff. But they sent us to Hawaya, and Gus nearly kills himself trying to be a kid on a surfboard, and I go around with you all day in the sun and now I've gotten drunk on coconuts. And none of this would've happened if that Sheila didn't hate us. But she does. She hopes we'll love this place and never come back, that's why she sent us here, cause she's the Hawaya type. But do you know where we wanted to go, do you?" she demanded. Her face was flushed bright, and a memory of the heart condition came back to Kay.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Holman, you're just upset now. Maybe I should go get Mr. Holman for you--"

"No, no, leave him, he's making the best of it, pretending his own son doesn't hate him. And what if he did have him promoted home? He was only doing the best he could for him. And he feels so old now, Gus does, and he just wanted to have his only son with him. But now we're in the way, and we won't die, so they send us off. And not even where we wanted to be, not even to Rome. Gus always wanted to see Rome, and so did I. He always said, I want to see Rome just once before I die. But instead he's running around on the beach at Wai--" and Barb was crying, and Kay hugged her and let her cry, and took her inside to rest. She held the woman's soft, wrinkled hand as she fell asleep on the hotel twin bed, and sat there for a long time afterward, just looking at the sleeping Barb.

Kay saw them on the beach next day, and they both looked tanned and cheerful. They seemed as similar, and as placid, as two twin babies. Gus was planning to go out in a canoe at sunset, and was trying playfully to convince Barb to come along, although they both probably knew she wouldn't. They were headed into the hotel, and they waved and greeted Kay in passing, looking to be as unconcerned as all the other tourists on the beach. But when--

Nearby Kay sat the secretary of the luau, kneeling over red-headed Don and smearing suntan oil across his freckled shoulders. But when you got to know them, who wasn't desperate?

She kicked sand before her, running down to the water's edge, and she remembered suddenly races into the ocean in her childhood, scampering figures linking hands and chanting the words of a cigarette commercial. She recalled it as freshly as if she were making it up.

She swam, putting her feet down as little as possible to avoid the bits of coral that remained after a century of dredging and blasting. It was iridescent, the water, no other word for it, and green-blue as a shower through tears, and beautiful. There was something to it, all right, being as inane as you please and as desperate as all the rest. She caught a wave into shore. She enjoyed the mild air and the breeze that bathed her as she returned to her towel. Like a child washing she scrubbed at her face with the terry, and when she looked at the brightness again, the sandy-haired man was sitting in his usual spot, looking at her with his bright eyes uncovered. His funny hair was sticking up. She smiled at him.

"How was the water?" he asked.

"Not bad," Kay replied.

THE GIRL AND THE COCKROACH

The girl tossed back the twisted sheets, but the summer air still wrapped her in its close and scratchy blanket. She wished for a dream she could draw about her like cool muslin.

Instead, hunger joined her, midnight strong. Strawberry pie waited, jelly cold, in the refrigerator...but in the night the kitchen territories had been ceded to the others in an unspoken diplomacy. The refrigerator lay in their zone.

Still, that hunger. Shortening, chilled now into layers in the crust. Icy milk. It had been weeks now since a night venture into the kitchen although a burst of bug spray had been her parting volley each night before lights out. Perhaps they were not there, had given up. Strawberry pie.

"Oh, damn, it's my kitchen," the girl said with a final restless swing of the covers. "That's what's wrong with the world these days, all this giving in to terrorists. Black-mail."

She lit her way across the apartment, hoping to give warning. Slowly, her nightgown trailing, she stepped along the hall. At last, the kitchen. She gathered her nerve, then in one motion entered and hit the light switch. The door swung shut behind her, trapping her there.

"Hello, my dear," he said. "Do come in. The others have all gone. Departed, I should say. Hem, they just will

hang about these places where the air is a trifle, shall we say, unhealthy. I'm lucky myself, strong as an ant--as an ox, you'd call it. Stay in shape." He adjusted his dark racing glasses and leaned against the counter. "I would have left myself, but I've been hoping to meet you. Such a cook, it's rare these days, hem, things made from scratch. Very rare. I felt we must have a lot in common."

She could not scream, she could not breathe. She could not attack, he was too big. She could not retreat, he might follow. She looked with despair at the new can of poison on the windowsill, dwindled to a toy beside him. He was so very big. She noted, with the calm of helplessness, that he was just under six feet, not counting the antennae, a big dark fellow gleaming ruddy with health. The polished shell across his chest contrasted with his swarthy bare limbs to give him the air of something ancient and vital, a Roman soldier on leave, perhaps. His voice, in contrast, had a staginess, an edge of affectation, she associated with prep schools and ham actors. And giant roaches.

"You came, of course," he said, "for the pie. No, my love, I haven't touched the pie. I don't open refrigerators"--though, she thought, studying the pairs of long arms crossed negligently over the broad chest, he certainly could--"we have our rules. Living off the largesse of others, rather like Robin Hood in the forest, don't you know. Now, as a bit of a detective myself, I simply added up the trimmings in the garbage

and the rolling pin in the sink and--no sooner than you can say Bellona Club--I knew."

The girl stirred, and eyed the back door. She could toss the pie as a diversion and escape down the back stairs.

The beast misconstrued the movement. "Yes, I know you're a mystery fan like myself, but you mustn't suppose I've been roving your living room or even, hem, exploring further to watch you whilst you sleep. Tempting thought, but no," he gave her a singularly large wink through the glasses, making her oddly aware that she wore only a nightgown, "you've left a book or two in the kitchen some nights. Do you read while you wait for the muffins? Yes? Ah, I noticed the coincidence of tins. Hem, 'Infinite variety: other women cloy the appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies.' Yes, you are just as I imagined."

Yes, she could run. He must need an incredible amount of food to live, he would weaken fast in a chase. And that dry little cough might not be just an affectation. But he was flattering, he wasn't threatening. She could look him in the eye.

"Do you know you are trespassing?" she asked softly.

"Oh, please, my love. These legal disputes over property, so bourgeois and plain boring. After all, if you look at it right, my family have been here," he gestured with long arms, virile and hairy, about the kitchen, "for generations."

She laughed. "So then, you are an aristocrat," she said, relaxing against the refrigerator. "Of what name?"

"Hem, pardon, so negligent of me, Henry de Creviass the eight hundred thousand and sixth, and, sad to say, the last of the name."

"Why is that?" Surely he was attractive. By roach standards, she amended.

"Yes, hem," he said, puffing out his chest a bit. "We de Crevisses have risen steadily, through the luck of environment, good breeding, and, if I may say, a superior intelligence, to making the very most of our genetic potential. You must realize that with our short life cycle evolution is speeded up for us. Why, hem, there are new breeds rising and falling every year, with your chemical warfare and all. But I stray.

"In our family, I," he fairly gleamed, "am the result. But along with superiority comes responsibility. I do not wish to lead to the decay, the decline, that so often curses aristocratic lines. Oh, I know," he eyed her through the racing glasses, thrust out his formidable jaw, "I know our reputation. We are indiscriminate, slaves to our appetites. We, if I may be blunt, fuck like flies. Not so. Oh, true, the lower orders, as lower orders will, divide their time between eating and reproducing, having no capacity for more. And to be frank, the females I meet, they are so low. Having babies, babies, babies, settling down, no taste, no discernment. Why, they'll stay in the old hole and eat a t.v. dinner, a stale crust, every night rather than travel about seeking the better things. Slobs. Oh, I've met them all. It's always

settle down Henry, let's eat in tonight, with a leer on their greasy faces." He shrugged. "Filthy roaches. Hem, harumph." He covered his mouth and coughed a bit. "Pardon. Allergies. Not catching."

"I--I'm afraid I spray in here," she apologized. "I won't anymore."

"Why thank you. I--that's sweet of you. But don't worry, I'm more hardy than most. Blood, hem, will tell. I'm sorry, I've been boring you with my life story, and most of that part is long gone, for now, I lead a lonely life. Of course, physically now I am a freak, far too large for any of my species. But let's not talk about me, let's talk about you. I can't say how fascinated I am by you. Tell me, have you ever thought of, hem, hack."

"Yes," she said, leaning forward. She noticed the hair on his long graceful legs. She wondered if he liked breakfast foods.

"Hem, pardon me. You've been most tolerant. You say you sprayed tonight?"

"Yes, it's a new can of stuff, over there."

"Hem, yes, hack, expensive stuff." He thumped at his chest. "You gave up the drugstore special I see. It seems to be quite strong. I'm afraid I shall have to, hem, leave you for a time. And just when I was about to, oh well, another hack night my lady, hem." He groped for the door knob. "I'll

let myself out the back, no trouble, I know, hem, har hem,
the way. Hack."

"Oh, don't go," she cried, as he went, bent, his gloss
dimming, out onto the landing. "Come back, you can come out
of the kitchen, away from the spray." She followed him out
and leaned over the rail as he started down the stairs.

"Don't worry, hem hack, I'll return, or if not, some-
day I'll come, my queen," he paused and set one foot upon a
bundle of newspapers. He gestured wide with all his arms
and declaimed,

"Where souls do couch on flowers we'll hand in hand
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops
And all the haunt be ours. Come, Eros, Eros
Hack. Hack. Hack. Hack."

He moved slowly down the stairs. In the dark, musty
passage he lifted the glasses and his eyes shone, great black
jewels.

"I am dying Egypt, dying. Although, hack, I am the
Egyptian one, aren't I? Ancient origins, you know, hack, haw.
Worshipped as gods, weren't those the days. I could draw a
genealogy, but, hack, too late. Too late for us. This grave,
hack, yes, very grave, charm

Whose eyes--hah!--muffins--beckoned forth my wars,
Something, hack, something else,
Whose bosom was my crownnet, my chief end,

Like a right gypsy hath at fast and loose
 Beguiled me to the very heart of loss, hack, haw,
 But I will be a bridegroom in my death, and run into't
 As to a lover's bed."

And he was gone.

She stood alone, quite alone, in the kitchen, and
 turned out the light. The heat twined around her with the
 darkness as she whispered,

"And there is nothing left remarkable

Beneath the visiting moon."

She filed a letter or two into the small jumbled
 bookcase in the living room, a shelf of correspondence to be
 attended to at the front of the magazine rack. She had held
 back her letters to him for as long as two weeks, just to
 foster this affect. Too bad she didn't keep copies of all
 these letters she sent him, over the months... they were
 perfect. He always called; she had nothing to save from him
 but two growing cards he'd picked, the ones with white couples
 stitched against matte-finish sunsets, personalized only by
 "Lynne, Tom." Yes, she should have kept copies of the letters,
 so she could trace the months of her dedication.

In some she worked in interesting things she was doing
 to show she was busy, getting along fine, yes. And then, it
 helped to stress the greater variety of life here than in

THE PALISADES GLISTEN

Kate scattered clues through her apartment: two wineglasses in the dishdrainer, the flowers she'd ordered, yellow roses, white carnations, no card in the envelope, on the sill in the living room. Maybe an ashtray on the floor by the bed? No good, she loathed cigarettes too much to smoke up some evidence, and the clean glass looked naive. She considered, and rejected, the effect of an extra toothbrush in the bathroom; she wanted him impressed with the fun she might be having, not convinced she had forgotten him completely.

She filed a letter or two into the small jumbled bookcase in the living room, a sheaf of correspondence to be attended to at the front of the magazine rack. She had held back her letters to him for as long as two weeks, just to foster this effect. Too bad she didn't keep copies of all those letters she sent him, over the months...they were perfect. He always called; she had nothing to save from him but two greeting cards he'd picked, the kind with misty couples etched against matte-finish sunsets, personalized only by "Yours, Tom." Yes, she should have kept copies of the letters, so she could trace the months of her dedication.

In some she worked in interesting things she was doing to show she was busy, getting along fine, yes. And then, it helped to stress the greater variety of life here than in

Michigan. Day trips into the city, shows she had seen, two-line reviews of new movies. And she worked in walks by familiar spots in Tareytown. Her best effort of this sort began, "Sunday, 3 a.m.--Dear Tom, How be you? I am generally crocked as I just got in from a party--no one you know, so no one sends greetings." And from there, licensed by drink, she had blended a touch of sex, a dash of jealousy, and even one tender, maudlin drop.

Other letters she wrote from imaginary characters, in a variety of styles. "Kitty" missed him vewy much, poor baby, and "Leslie" gave advice, and "Brigitte" found time for a few sultry lines.

She wrote serial letters, supposed scraps she stitched in between the busy hours, then gathered together to a haphazard quilt. These she often composed all in one sitting.

And sometimes at night, late, she made small broken notes, wondering how he had left her, what hold she had lost, had never had. These never saw envelopes.

Kate stood in the middle of the living room. Here the scene was decorated, ready for the big entrance. The apartment looked right, yes, bright and clean and warm. There were new pictures since he'd left, but all the solid simple furniture he'd built was there. It took her much resolve to make changes, but she didn't want to feel like the keeper of a museum, either. A new shower curtain, towels, sheets, all soft yellow. The bathroom was fine, the kitchen stocked.

She had dressed carefully, but casually, arranged all, and now, three-thirty, a half hour to go. Where should she be sitting. Not out here, no, off in the bedroom, so it could take some time to answer the door. She should give the bedroom some final touches, get collected.

The bedspread met her with cool silky quilting, and she felt the flush in her cheeks. She must have been darting around the place for hours. Well, good, color in her cheeks, not pale pining love. He would ring.

-Just a minute, she'd call out. Or

-In a minute. Or

-Be right there. Yes, breezy. She would walk through the living room slowly, looking for the new Impala through the double windows. He'd be there at the door. He'd look--tired? A bit repentant?

-Damn but I've missed you, Katie.

No, damn it, he'd look great. Maybe heavier, living on his own for nearly five months he probably drank too much and ate dutch pretzels. But he'd been enjoying the training, out there in Flint, he was always happy on the phone, saying a lot but telling nothing. There was no other girl; he'd even teased and complained about that. No other girl, he would have told her. He always said he appreciated being able to level with her.

No other girl. He'd need a haircut, not too much. She would do it. No rush, hell, he'd be here two weeks. All that

time. And she wouldn't make any mistakes, not one. Her gaze traced the outlines of the furniture in the bedroom. Just a candle and a hairbrush, clean, on the dresser. She had bundled all the clutter into a plastic bag and tucked it into a carton in the closet.

Would he start off passionately, she wondered. Would he greet her with a

-Well, and where's my hug?

-Right here. Hey, what are you doing?

-Why, Katie, it's been a long time. Why wait...and he'd wrestle her across the room, the way he used to, when he first moved in. Or, would they be distant as strangers? He was staying here, wasn't he? And he knew damn well how uncomfortable that couch he'd built was. And he wouldn't wait around till eleven or so and then sneak up to her, just for a mattress. That was the best in Tommy, he was so open, so bluff.

No, the desk was wrong. She sat up abruptly and reached across to the drawer of the small white desk. She'd put away the well-marked calendar and the confusion of checking account statements and old bills. But she'd forgotten the pictures. She pulled out the envelope of enlargements she'd picked up Thursday, the photos of their trip that last weekend. She lay the two good shots out on the bedspread, trying each one in the matting she'd bought, sunny orange. The photos were good; the light had been too dim, she thought, but it seemed the river had reflected enough. Their last weekend. She didn't

look, there in the pictures, the way she'd felt, tight in the stomach, close to sick, wanting him to say the word, ask her along. Why hadn't he? Why hadn't she outright asked to come?

In one photo, she stood thin and smiling, her hair blowing around her face. She was looking at Tom. Kate felt naked, just seeing that face; every line, chin, cheek, eyes, all pointed to Tommy. He, out of focus, inches back, gazed over her head. The other shot, Tommy alone, she had taken.

-Stand there, against the rail.

-Now don't be telling me to take one more step back, Katie, or I'll think you've got insurance on me.

-Which thingie do you hit?

-The red one. Hold the camera still. Stop laughing.

-Stop making faces then, you lug.

It wasn't a good picture of him, all ruddy young salesman, the Chevrolet man, his features indistinct, evasive. Just a blocky shape really against the background. It was a beautiful shot of the Palisades.

It had been a crazy idea. He was to leave Monday, was all packed, and she had felt his going wasn't marked enough. He was treating it just like heading into the city for a day or two. There had never been an announcement, really. The chance of promotion had been mentioned a long time and sort of eased into reality. If there'd been an announcement. If he'd come home and just told her, then perhaps she could have had a big reaction, tears and all, and he'd have broken through,

too. But hopes, promotion, training, all came in such shallow steps she could only smile and shrug, keep her fears in, afraid of overwhelming him with her alarm.

So, she'd suggested that, before he leave Tarrytown, they should do what every tourist did, what every resident missed, take the cruise upriver to Bear Mountain, West Point, and back. For years they'd heard the ads, "The Palisades glisten in the morning sun..."

At first, he'd been grumpy, complaining about baseball on t.v. But driving into the city to catch the boat he'd done the tourist thing big, and aboard he led her as they listened to the accents around them.

-Now this is more like it.

-Better'n that subway.

-Stinkin noisy thing. I thought sure we'd all be dead and lyin there like skunks on the interstate, nobody even lookin but to go around us.

-Well, Joe Pat, your mama will like this better. We'll keep to the tours from now on.

-We'll get thrown offm if mama don't stop standin up and pointin and shoutin down the bus, look there Joe, look over There, every time she sees somethin. It's embarrassin. I'm not going to let on I know her from now on.

They had walked round the deck, listening, enjoying. When they reached their home territory they smiled with pride of ownership at the guide's metal voice crying "Washington

Irving" and "Sleepy Hollow." The terrain had moved Kate, she couldn't say how. Shadows of clouds drifted over the water, the early sailboats, and the face of the bluffs, and she felt exposed, brought from a warm safe corner out into the wind and open. She could say nothing, none of what she had planned, not the arch speech provoking jealousy, nor the blunt statement of how she would miss him, nor the best one, the moving one, of how she wanted to be with him because she plain damn loved the shit out of him. But no words came. She just stood at the side and let the breeze chafe her. Once, feeling how dry her teeth were, she realized she was smiling into the wind. She forced a pout.

-What's the matter?

She looked at him, holding the frown, feeling the sad lines on her face.

-Come on, what is it?

You dope, she thought, you're leaving me. So I have to tell you that? Why couldn't he read her.

-Oh, nothing. She stared at the water. He didn't inquire further.

They picnicked at Bear Mountain, while the boat went on to turn around. They sat near the empty lodge and studied the naked ski trails, greening with spring. She asked about his work, showed interest.

-What will Flint be like, do you think?

-Pretty grungy I guess. Another car town.

-Oh. I kind of thought it would be lumberjacks and wild woods. Fishing.

-Why?

-Well, Flint, Michigan. Listen to it. It sounds rugged and wild. Flint. Campfires and arrowheads. You know.

He was cleaning up the picnic trash, throwing away all he could, scattering the crumbs. He liked to throw things away, she thought, to be unencumbered. He never carried anything in his pockets.

-Just another place, I guess. It'll be funny, living in some motel apartment.

-Why will it be funny, she asked. She tilted her head left almost to the shoulder. Thin sunshine hit her back.

-Oh, guess I've got used to having company, he said.

Here, now, she thought. But she couldn't push.

Why didn't she say

-You can have me along. Or

-Will you miss me? Or even spit

-Is that all I am, company? Kate, looking at her pictures, wondered. Why just sit there, with her head tilted, waiting.

-Guess I'll find another trainee to room with soon enough, he said.

On the return trip, they'd taken the pictures. She had brought the camera; she wanted the remembrance. Was that how he'd looked, a blurry shape, with thick short hair ruffling

about a large head? Taking the picture, she'd only seen him in her focus. She hadn't noticed the shapes she saw now, the blotches of shadow on the bluffs.

Kate snapped the picture of Tom into the matting and held it in her lap. The bluffs and the river, the smells foul and fresh mixed, were clear to her even in this air-conditioned September. And she saw the Palisades, like Tommy. He was open and exposed as those bluffs, yes, bluff was the word for him. He faced toward fresh air, new winds. And, damn him, like a bluff, just as hard to find a hold on, impossible to scale. No sinking in a stake, sheer rock. All this time to wonder how they had missed making contact. He'd said it straight out, from the first: he wanted to go places, to rise. He never wanted children, he wanted to travel. If he'd waited, spoken later, she'd have felt she was learning, getting into the depths, the true feelings, but no. There they were, all his opinions, all his feelings, as blatant as the huge signs splashed on the rockface by teenage boys, Tommy Was Here.

Was there more, inside the rock? That was it, of course, the appeal about his type of man. Solid as rock, so you knew support could be found. Mysterious as rock, no way of knowing, were there diamonds within, quartz crystals, or solid stone.

Was it impossible to say the right word, to hit the wedge in at just the right angle? She could never think of questions to ask him; she had all the information about his

life. He scattered memories about, pebbles of him, whole and smooth, nothing hidden. He carried nothing in his pockets.

And she tried to open up herself, but never got far enough. Each openness seemed a pose. It was the poses that felt comfortable. The letters from "Kitty" and "Brigitte." When she cried, he would try to find a laugh, and there it was, coaxed right out. He could bring her round merry in minutes. And to her problems he gave frank and good advice, with no bit of worry in his turn. She studied the blurred, high-colored face...was it a genius of evasion there, or was it the unconscious grace of the silent comedian, who stoops to pick a flower and so is missed by the falling safe.

-Stand there, against the rail.

-Now, don't be telling me to take one step back, Katie, or I'll think you've got insurance on me.

-Which thingie do you hit?

-The red one. Hold the camera still. Stop laughing.

-Stop making faces then, you lug.

-Why do you want to take a picture now anyway. This rig is moving, it'll be all out of focus.

-Oh, Tom, now, shut up and smile. There. He moved away from the rail as she wound the film round.

-I just want it, that's all. She paused, blinking in the glare off the water, watching shadows scut by. Don't you want one of me?

-I know what you look like. He sighed, took the camera. She felt the breeze defining her face, all the words she could say quite gone.

-Excuse me sir. You sir, yes.

The fat pallid man held the diagonal blue and yellow stripes of his tie to his chest. His moustache was so thin it could be seen only when he was in shadow. Tommy stood over him, looking able to sell him a fleet of Chevys or the Tappan Zee Bridge.

-Where you from, sir?

-Why, Cl-Cleveland, Ohio.

-Mm, that's a long way. I've been through there, at least Akron, myself. Listen, Tommy lowered his voice, my lady would like a picture of us together, and we, you see, need someone to hold the camera, don't we?

-Yes, I--

-Thanks, it's that red button. Tommy thrust the camera at the man and stepped back, put an arm around her. She leaned against his chest as the man lifted the camera and his tie flew up into his mouth. She laughed. Click. He wound the film up earnestly, his creased jacket bunching under the arms. She looked away from him at Tommy's unfussy outline. The man gave her the camera. Smoothing down his tie, running his tongue over his moustache, he waited for Tommy's attention and brief thanks.

-Uh, glad to oblige. You two honeymooners? Kate had a moment to blush, curl her hand in her pocket.

-No, said Tommy. You?

-Je--my goodness, said the man, no sir, no indeed. My, my wife's down inside. Drinking coffee. Eunice? My goodness, and he walked away, his jacket riding up in back.

Kate traced the outlines of them together, the glossy surface of the photo. Did he see her at all, she wondered. Did he know how she felt. But then, how did she feel? She strained, hard, inside herself. She felt nothing. But hadn't how she felt been almost a full-time job, these months and more. Her speeches, her plans, her letters, didn't they all show it. She wanted to think about her tactics for tonight, but she faced the idea clearly. She got nothing from him, no nourishment, no warmth. His was the bitter challenge to a mountain climber, offering her no warm meadow in which to flower. But she must prefer that, prefer him. There were times enough when she could have broken through; it would have been easy enough to say a simple truth, but she couldn't offer that, nor even the practiced speeches of it. Had the moment passed, long ago, when she decided not to?

She thought, too, studying the pictured face and the sharp detail of rock, what if I did. What if he cracked, the cave opened to sunlight. What if within was nothing but the earthy roots, dark tubers, that grew in everyone, crude potato guilts, radish dreams. No more crystal miracles than in anyone, no more than he could find in her. If he opened first, now, what could she do. Would she bluff it out.

The pictures were torn partway through, across her smile and the broad chest. She had split them, across the gloss and paper. Nothing underneath the shine but blank white paper. Like her, the fake she was. She didn't want him. She felt a headache's early springing in her neck. She frowned, trying to hold this feeling, this hate she felt, of herself, not of him. Of her emptiness. What could she offer. But it wouldn't hold. She tucked the scraps of photo into the desk drawer and set the picture of Tommy against the lamp. She smoothed her skirt, shook back her hair. Well, he was late. What was she thinking of, all these cloudy ideas. Everything was ready. Was perfect. The doorbell rang. Two notes.

TO CARVE OUT DIALS QUAINLY, POINT BY POINT

The park called me, through the white summer curtains, over the lawnmower drones. Once it was as familiar as the house, a shelter of nameless games and causeless fights. I must leave the house, the harsh small talk, the rituals of food offered and eaten without smell or taste. And the closed door at the head of the stairs, behind which the dwindling man of fifty hastened his departure refusing sweet tubes, swift needles, or a last wild ride in the nice truck with the whirling light. They had moved him into my room, that room at the head of the stairs, where now he memorized each angle of roof, each paintlayered plaster crack, my earliest lesson. Though the letters he once wrought with his jigsaw for a child fell away years back when the glue dried out, I think we all still saw my name ghosted across that closed door, "Macy."

The living room furniture couldn't hold me; each chair had dwindled and my feet rested huge and clumsy on the floor. The park would be smaller, too, but as I jumped the back steps I prepared myself for that. The park would be smaller. Already I'd covered the single block of neat lawns, just starting to brown nicely and curl up at the edges. The block once passed with quick breaths, tears starting, six o'clocks rushing home for dinner.

-And where were you, miss? Daddy asks.

-I didn't know what time it was.

-I didn't know. We'll have to teach this girl to read the sun down there, or maybe you'd like to move in permanently, eat berries and roots.

Two empty beer cans in the kitchen, the pewter mug with dragons on the table, warn caution.

-Did you wash your hands?

-Yes, sir.

-Let me see. Hold them out where I can see them.

Long calloused hand comes down over two small ones, white for a moment. I try not to cry, steadying my face with outthrust lower lip, despite all threats that it will freeze that way, and he forgets and tells a joke. I try to sulk, to be silent, and my face aches as I struggle against the smile. He forgets his angers quickly. So do I.

I turned down the path, our back way into the park, thinking. All times were in that place for me, all weathers.

Why do I remember only the bad parts? All week I have been trying, circling the shrunken rooms, trying to recall good times, kindnesses. I know they had a place, picnics and parties, laughter. I know when they must have occurred. But the remembrances, the reconstructions in full three-d and color, have all been foolish grievances, disobediences, and punishments. Why? Here's the place, no, a few steps on. Surely it was more secret then, our hide-out. Two gangs,

piling acorns. Only one gang, Brad's, allowed girls in. With an initiation right here, in a hollow sheltered by three bushes from the path above, by a bank of them from the tennis courts downhill. The park commission must have ripped a lot of bushes out. We, the girls, had to sit on a worm, pull down the pink flowered underpants, just in back, and sit, squish, on a worm. Was it alive or dead? I can't remember, nor the day I did it. Just a small sexy feeling, bare against the dirt. Brad's gang--we didn't get to see the boys' initiation, nor, come to think of it, get to throw the acorns at the small but strong band of older boys, Jimmy's gang. We were gatherers, filling paper bags with acorns, carrying dirty pocketfuls of acorns across lawn battlefields, rubbing the sting on the arm or cheek when one hit. Weeks later, when the squirrels had filched the ammunition, we gathered late fall apples, small and rotten. The gangs fell apart when the snow came on. How many years did we do that, all blending together. Maybe it was only one.

The park is cool. I reach the bottom of the path, under the trees called petticoat ladies, green plain leaves in summer stillnesses, ruffled silver when the breeze flirted with the pale undersides. Past the tennis courts, the park opens out, still empty in June. A Monday. Waiting, it is, for school to end and release the summer population. To my right, the playground. Ahead, all ahead, the lake, swamps upstream, the falls and brooks downstream. In the widest part, Duck Island, a protected nestingplace.

I approach the boathouse, crouched at the waters edge, extending paws of silvered wood into the water for ladies stepping into rowboats busy Sundays, for skaters shaving a bold approach and stalking up the ramps to the benches and hot chocolate inside winter nights.

-The pain is like an icepick, he said.

Seventh graders form whips twenty wide across the ice. I close my eyes and brace my legs and cling to the hands through double mittens, let myself be pulled across. Just don't let me be the one to let go. I don't dare unlock a knee to push us along; I am a weight, a drag. When the sight of a park policeman on skates makes them let go of me, I fling on until the wind on my jacket slows me enough so I can fall down. I fall each time and still I am afraid of it. No, the falling is solid and just as hard as ice, no harder; it's the flying free, out of control, balance a greased rope I cannot cling to, air slick and thin and breathless.

I did not know what he meant.

-An icepick, he said, a week ago, his eyes huge, shining.

-They always say that, the doctor said, giving me his dry hand at the door. Icepicks, they were--

-I know, I said. I tried to recall seeing an icepick. Making daiquiris for parties, we would wrap ice cubes in a towel and hammer at the bundle with a high heeled shoe. An icepick belongs to his memories, ice boxes, ice men. Icepick murders. Carved ice swans. An artistic pain perhaps, delicate

and sharp and strong. Certain, anyway. Does it help to define? Do swift sharp strokes shaping, carving the flesh, frighten him less than riding free on an ungraspable drugged surface? Will we feel our pain differently when the diseases catch us in thirty years because we won't have that term to nail it with?

I turn from the boathouse, feeling with shock the sun warming my scalp. A June day. A Monday. The park seems full of spaces, breezes batted between the trees. I remember nothing good about myself or him. Why is it? I know so many times he brought me here, walked me around the lake, always pausing on the graceful stone bridge. But I couldn't retrieve those days. We all had looked for reasons for this illness. Grandma said God had his reasons, but her chin was beginning to tremble even when she didn't cry, and she wanted God to show cause. And Mother will not break any promise she has made him, ever, so afraid is she of giving guilt an opening. She has promised everything, these months, even to unplug him from any machine they hook his life on. And I--can I skip a stone yet? A few ducks ferry across to their island, away from me. I search bad memories, but there is no cause there. It's not my fault.

I turn away from the lake, toward the playground. High swings and baby swings remain, the merry-go-round, the slide. It seems I always played here with fear, not of falling from the swings to the sand nor of landing too hard off the slide.

But fear of flying too high, sliding too fast, whirling dizzily. I have some brakes within me. Who cheated me? There used to be a corral here, low wooden fences and a wooden horse, logs to walk, a seesaw. All hacked rough and solid, my favorite place to play, to invent. I walk around the rectangle. The postholes remain, in the soil gone loose and gray with the yearly deposits of sand the county trucks in to pad the tumbles of children. And here, at the far corner, near the brook, just a stump now. The tree had been an oak, the whole corral tied to it, shaded by it.

A little girl crouches there, one late afternoon. It has rained all day, and I walk out alone after a tiresome day of reread books and charmless dolls. The park is empty, worms stranding themselves on the paths, cobwebs showing bright in the grass. The little girl, squatting at the base of the oak, is a stranger. A new girl. Smaller than me. I don't like her. I enter my corral and sit on the low end of the fat log seesaw. She crosses to me and pulls the high end down, using all of her. I stand to let her get on, the bold thing. Then sit, firm in the sand, leaning back. She is trapped in the air, and though she bumps and jounces she can't lift me more than an inch. So she smiles and says

-I'm Susie.

-Where do you live? She gestures past the falls. Across town? She nods. Across the avenue? How old are you?

-Seven. I'm not supposed to cross the avenue.

-Me neither, I agree. And I'm eight. Are you lost?
I can take her home, we can call her parents if she is. Her legs are plump and round and I envy her. Mine are skinny, and my arms, too, and I am alswys the last one chosen in softball.

-Nah. I know how to get back. It's the big gray house. Daddy's name is out front, big.

-Why?

-My daddy is a doctor.

I start pushing. I get off the ground, but land again fast. She digs into the sand with her heels each time, but she can't hold my weight up.

-My daddy, he sells cars now. But he was a war hero, in the Navy.

-What'd he do?

-There's a statue to him at Pearl Harbor. He told us all about it. Him and Bull Halsey.

-What's Bull Halsey?

-A big Navy guy too. She looks doubtful. A doctor has his office with all the shiny tools and the shots and the nurse, right there, solider than a statue.

-He was on a destroyer. He has tattoos.

-Let me down, she says. I stand up and swing a leg over, keeping my hands on the log, letting her down gently. She sits up and swats at the sand on her backside. Let's climb the tree, she says.

The tree rises smooth and straight a long way up, then spreads into good firm branches. I just look up.

-Boost me, she orders. She scrabbles at the bark, and I push at the round cushiony bottom, and sand falls out of her shorts in my face.

-No, wait. Step here, and I lace my hands into a stirrup and lift. She reaches up into the crotch and pulls herself up. Then she wraps her legs in among the branches, leans out, and pulls me up by the hands. I walk right up the tree, she is that strong. We sit, now we are there, and look around. The tree can be a cave or a ship, but I do not want to offer her my games, so I dangle my legs, light and bony. Clouds play in shadow on the corral below.

-I'm Macy, I say.

-For the parade? She looks right at me.

-No, it's in the family. She shrugs. But I went to the parade once.

She crawls out on each branch as far as it will hold her without bending, each time shaking loose a shower. I sit with my back wedged between two branches. The first yellow bug edges out at my feet, between the red sneakers. Susiel She crawls back. We watch, silent, as they surge through the drying cracks in the tree, crawling yellow, fat and blind-looking. We watch as they move across the bowl between the branches, no number to them. We edge backward onto a branch and she jumps. I am spattered with old raindrops, there among

the leaves. I could crush the bugs, jump onto them and squash their yellow blood from them. I would rather not jump. They come on, spreading, covering the bark, and I jump, fall, close my eyes, and land solid.

For a minute we scuff gray sand.

-I have to go home, I say. It's almost six.

-How do you know? she asks. I didn't hear the whistle.

I arch way back, studying the sun over Duck Island, a great distance.

-I can tell time by the sun, I boast. It's a Navy thing.

-You can't.

-Sure. It's--quarter of six.

-Really, she said.

-Don't you believe me? Quarter of six, maybe ten of. I've got to go. Sure you're not lost?

-Bye. She takes off towards the path by the falls, heels almost hitting the chubby thighs, she kicks so hard. I turn for home, suddenly afraid it might really be near six.

And I should turn for home now. They don't know where I am, and Grandma will be over and I will be calm and good at letting her reminisce. My job is listening. Mother has to take the phone calls, the good neighbors peering at the back door. The doctor looks the most helpless of any of us, this week, his face puckered with futility. All his training, I suppose, tells him to do something, and this one refuses his delays and

his dope. So the thin man, his shirt hanging loose from high square shoulders, comes every day for nothing. And Mother leads him to the kitchen and soothes him with small talk.

-And how's Mark, Dr. Cohen?

-Fine. He was home last weekend. Now, he'll have an easier night of it if you can get him to take even one of these.

-He won't. And Susan?

-Very well. Studying at Johns Hopkins, you knew that, almost done. But she's planning to specialize. Have you been sleeping? Could I--

I make a quick resolve. She will not doctor me.

And so, what is that, Fate, big F, descending, catching me in its web? It's a small town. I felt the edge of a memory when I saw her in high school. No mighty circumstance, wheeling to strange ironies. Just a small town. I am not the center of the universe. Still, she won't doctor me.

I stand on the stump. How strong the tree had been, how large. They cut down the diseased trees each year. And they planted seedlings. All controlled. No struggling acorn surviving worms and the wars of children, squirrel, storm and sand to find its way to grow, no magnificent crash to the ground on a stormy night, casting out birds, raising a wind.

-You are not supposed to die at home any more, really now, Mrs. Mahar. Whatever you promised, we can call an ambulance and he won't know. It will be so much easier on...

You are supposed to let go. Put it in their hands.
Ride where they send you, all rush and whoosh.

I sit on the stump facing Duck Island. The lake
drowns under the low late sun. June. A Monday. My seat on
the stump is just right, the right height. I fit here. The
sun strikes me and I can feel the light of it, the waves of
energy, a tingling life. I am glad to be alive. I am glad it
is him, not me. I do not want it ever to be me.

There is an itching under me, a crawling in my pants,
the kind you get when you watch mosquitoes breed and hatch in
films, or see the nightmare bugs covering walls and floors when
you open your eyes a flash too soon. I hold myself there, as
a child must have done on the worm, as a child did debating
the swarm or the fall. As a man held the pain in him, icepick
thin and sharp, refusing to go numb.

And I run, across the gray sand, up the path, hurling
through the greased air, unable to breathe, run, run, rushing
home, and know it is past six and I will be too late.